

New Britain Herald: Youth Cabinet Tells Rep. Larson What They Want From Government

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New Britain Herald-Ralph Hohman

Hartford-U.S. Rep. John Larson's Youth Advisory Cabinet filled three conference tables and lined the walls of the Capitol building's Senate Chambers in Hartford Saturday.

Fueled by trays of muffins, clementines, M&Ms and jugs of orange juice, they poured out ideas to Eva Bunnell, Larson's field representative for youth and families.

The meeting was the second so far for the cabinet, an assembly of 33 high school students.

This is no feel-good, meet-the-congressman photo op, Bunnell said.

Instead, she said, the Youth Advisory Cabinet is a serious, long-term attempt to get real ideas from a demographic that's not often asked for its opinions.

"We're going to come up with issues that are really important to us as a cabinet," said one member, Wethersfield High School junior Bridget Cloonan.

The goal of this program, Bunnell said, was "using what they know and what the Congressman knows together to make better policy that is actually meaningful and functional."

She said she would round up all the ideas for topics and requests for expert guests and distill the information into something Larson and the group can work from.

Calvin Brown wants the cabinet to talk about No Child Left Behind, about keeping kids free from sexual predators and preserving after-school programs.

"We need to fund them," said Brown, a Bristol Eastern High School sophomore, "so they can happen in schools and keep kids off the streets."

Southington High junior Isabelle Palumbo was interested in the environment, the economy and "drug problems that are in our school, because that's been brought up a lot," she said. "We've had a couple of deaths in the past couple of years."

Students are appointed to two-year terms by their school superintendents. They meet monthly, and are breaking up into subcommittees by area of interest.

Larson, D-1st District, attended the start of the meeting Saturday, then left to attend the funeral of a friend, said his spokesman, Paul Mounds. Before he left, Larson asked the students, "What can you do that makes a difference?"

He told them there were many things government could do, but reading a bedtime story, visiting someone isolated from the world and intervening on behalf of a friend were not among them. Students could do those things, and tell him what they think might be needed for legislation.

Kristen Welgarz, a senior at Bristol Central High School, said students usually don't get asked for that kind of feedback.

"The school systems sometimes don't listen to youth perspective," Welgarz said. "They almost run it like a business."

Larson's Youth Advisory Cabinet also includes: Breanna Vessichio and Carson Collier of Berlin, Nicole Iacobucci, Nicholas Grondin and Samantha Iacobucci of Newington, Gabrielle Franza and Andrew John Duarte of Rocky Hill and Alexander Tougas of Wethersfield.

Palumbo said forming the group was a smart idea. For one thing, she said, "In a few short years we're going to be the ones voting."

Also, Palumbo said that in her graduating class of about 500, "there are so many opinions, and you talk to so many other kids. If it's an adult, they won't talk to 300 or 400 students a day."

